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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001280

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, DRL, DRL/IRF
NSC FOR E.MILLARD

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SUBJECT: IN MEETINGS, PDAS CAMP HEARS POLITICALLY
WIDESPREAD OPPOSITION TO ANTI-CONVERSION BILLS

REF: COLOMBO 1244 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead. Reasons 1.5(b,d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: During July 30-31 meetings, PDAS Donald Camp expressed the USG's concern for religious freedom in Sri Lanka to government officials and political interlocutors. Prime Minister Rajapakse stated that the government was pursuing its own anti-conversion bill to thwart the anti-conversion bill presented by the JHU party of Buddhist monks. The GSL planned to use all tactics in its power to keep the JHU bill from reaching Parliament for debate and vote. Opposition Leader Wickremesinghe also stated that he did not support either bill. Both political leaders said that party members would be allowed to vote their conscience if either bill came to a vote. The JHU maintained that its bill only intends to prevent "forcible" conversions and was aimed at protecting, not prohibiting human rights. It is not a foregone conclusion that these bills will be passed or even reach the floor for a vote. Mission remains engaged with the GSL on the negative ramifications of such a potential law. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) During July 30-31 meetings in Colombo, State Department PDAS for South Asia Donald Camp raised the issue of religious freedom in Sri Lanka with many interlocutors. Camp specifically queried government officials and opposition politicians about the recent developments with religious anti-conversion bills. (Note: The non-GSL political party of Buddhist monks, Jathika Hela Urumaya "JHU," has presented one anti-conversion bill to Parliament while the government has begun the process of drafting its own anti-conversion bill.) In all forums, both Camp and Ambassador Lunstead underscored that anti-conversion legislation would be a step backward for religious freedom in Sri Lanka. They urged the government to consider positive steps, such as a mutually agreed voluntary code of behavior, to address the issue before it became a problem in the United States' bilateral relationship with Sri Lanka.

Prime Minister negative on bills

13. (C) Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse offered insight into the government's intentions regarding anti-conversion legislation. Rajapakse described the government bill as a temporary measure to counter the one presented by the JHU. Further, the government intended to bring motions and other procedural actions to keep the JHU bill from being debated in Parliament. Rajapakse admitted his fear that the JHU bill could pass if it reached Parliament for a vote. Given the recent challenges filed against the JHU bill, the PM said he did not know how the Supreme Court would rule, but added a negative ruling could effectively end the effort.

14. (C) Regarding the government's own bill, the PM said he instructed Buddhist Affairs Minister Wickremenayake to discuss the issue with other religious leaders to develop a balanced bill. Rajapakse also acknowledged that many Buddhist groups, including leading clergy, were against an anti-conversion bill. (Note: Rajapakse was remarkably candid in discussing his party's delaying tactics. His confidence needs to be strictly protected.)

Opposition not supportive

15. (C) During a later meeting with Camp, United National Party (UNP) head and Opposition Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe expressed his condemnation of anti-conversion legislation. Wickremesinghe thought of two possible ways the GSL could obstruct a potential vote on an anti-conversion bill. The government could pressure the Supreme Court to throw out the bill or assign the bill to a parliamentary standing committee, letting it linger there without further debate or action.

16. (C) Separately, the Ambassador spoke on August 1 with UNP MP (and former UNP peace process negotiator) G.L. Peiris about Sri Lanka's anti-conversion debate. Peiris said that in a July 31 meeting, the Chief Incumbent of the Asgiriya Sect -- one of the leading sects of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and

a respected voice on social issue -- spoke of his opposition to an anti-conversion bill. (Note: The leading Buddhist clergy of the Malwatte Temple, the other main sect, has also expressed disapproval of such legislation.) Similar to other interlocutors' comments, Peiris also confirmed that the JHU bill could be sent to a parliamentary select committee, where it could theoretically languish, without ever reaching the floor for a vote.

Vote on Conscience

17. (C) Both the PM and Wickremesinghe stated that party members would likely be allowed to vote their conscience on the issue if any bill on religious anti-conversion reached the floor for a vote.

JHU out to protect human rights

18. (C) During their discussion with PDAS Camp, three MP monks from the JHU explained their support for an anti-conversion bill. The JHU was against "forcible" conversions, they stated through a translator. They were not against other religions and supported conversions in general, as monks often go abroad to convert people to Buddhism. Describing being "paid to convert" as an insult to all religions, the monk MPs said that such conversions impinged on people's religious freedom. The party members urged the USG to study the bill carefully, as its purpose was only to protect human rights, not violate them. It was "others" who had spread an inaccurate picture of the JHU's intentions with the anti-conversion bill. In return, PDAS Camp urged them to consult closely with other religious groups on this issue.

Comment

19. (C) Given all the noise and public discussion on this issue, we would like to underscore that the passage of an anti-conversion bill -- or even a vote on a draft bill -- is not a foregone conclusion. Many throughout the government and political and civil arenas are trying to stop this legislation. It is a divisive and intensely personal issue and it appears that few would be willing to sacrifice individual beliefs simply for political expediency. In light of the earnest efforts by leading Sri Lankans to take a stand against this legislation, for maximum effectiveness, the USG role in this issue should be to tread lightly. We will continue our quiet, behind-the-scenes work to remind Sri Lankans, especially government officials, that such a law would seriously harm religious freedom and serve to exacerbate ethnic tensions. END COMMENT.

110. (U) PDAS Donald Camp cleared this message.

LUNSTEAD